ARTIFICIAL SWEETENER

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Introduction

Humidity. It's the first real memory I have of an inescapable sort of sticky feeling on my body and in my mind that I could not get rid of. I was 6 years old and, being from Chicago, I had never experienced heat quite like July in south Florida. It was mid morning—my mom, sister, brother and I had just arrived the night before—visiting my long-absent father at his current place of residence in Tampa. I remember feeling out of control in this place; when I walked outside, it was hard to breathe, hard to walk without sticking to something- the ground, myself, or to each other. The photographs from this "vacation" communicate nothing of the actual experience of being there. They are just iterations of idyllic family snapshots, countless images of beaches, sunsets, and kids playing in the sand. I still think about that trip to Florida from time to time—how many things have changed since that week in 1997, how many things started there, too. How, unknowingly, it was the last time I would really see my family for the people I had grown to know and expected them to be.

This paper will discuss my current MFA Thesis project entitled: *Artificial Sweetener,* both as an exhibition as well as an exploration of psychological "stickiness." Photography is the primary medium for this project. The conceptual basis of the work is an investigation of the ways in which photographs distort actual memories and create performed, invented realities. I became fully immersed in exploring my *Artificial Sweetener* project in December 2015, when I went back to my childhood home in Chicago. I stumbled across many of my mother's recipes as well as several boxes of family photographs, consisting of over thirty years of documentation of my family's life.

With this project I am exploring the misrepresentation of images as truth as well as the influence that photography has in the misrepresentation of reality. Since the early practices of photography, photo-historical documentation has been interpreted as standard evidence of truth within historical context. Specifically, *Artificial Sweetener* examines particular relationships within the nuclear family and the incongruence between memory and photographic record. Using food materials, which are largely glutinous—candies, pastries, and sugary treats— as subjects I am exploring the stickiness of certain psychological spaces that are internalized from familial experiences.

Memory and photography have a way of intertwining and being confused as one in the same when in the context of family photographs. What "actually" happened in that moment in our preserved memory versus the photograph that stares at us often presents an entirely different truth, and is marked by a change in our perception over time. Since the 1970's, postmodernist photographers have been dissecting the 'truth' in photography and the manipulative power that images have. The original images taken of my family were used in a way to both invent a new, shared reality for us to remember, and to be used as a visual record of a collective familial experience. There is an ideology in viewing family photos, an 'image to live up to' in regards to an idealized nuclear family (Hirsch, 8). Through this series I am attempting to excavate another reality under the surface.

The substances I use in my photographs are heavy, sweet, sugar-based confections. They are artificial or "instant" ingredients, widely used in processed foods as well as in household baked goods. The root of the 'instant' meal goes back to 1950's America, but rose to heightened popularity in the 1970's, when more and more women joined the work force and had less time for domestic labor (Nye, n.p). Processed foods became increasingly popular in the 1990's, and especially enticing to single working-class parents, in need of quick results in the kitchen due to working full-time to both support and provide for their families. Essentially I misuse these types of foods in my photographs, manipulating them on my head and face. By using the ingredients in this way in both the family snapshots and the self-portraits, I emphasize 'stickiness' (figure 3). I highlight the uncomfortable, instantaneous nature of both the stylized, stiff photographic portrait, and the plasticity of these ingredients. These foods express both excess and absence, as these particular substances are the epitome of 'junk foods.' They are high in additives and artificial sweeteners, and provide no nutritional value to the human body, often even causing it palpable harm. These viscous materials serve as a stand-in for the inescapable, smothering stickiness of the psychological, emotional, and physical landscapes of my childhood that continues into my adult life.

This paper chronicles *Artificial Sweetener* not only as an exhibition, but also as a way to explore and re-contextualize the shifting systems that are present within a nuclear family— to question an assumed knowledge of the past and the invented realities we often create for

ourselves and for others. The *Artificial Sweetener* installation at the University of Hawai'i Art Gallery consists of twenty-three photographs digitally printed and dramatically scaled up from their original size (figure 17). Through their aesthetics and the connection every photograph has to my familial relationships, each image functions in a variety of ways as a self-portrait. The exhibition is a combination of found and reprinted family photographs, family recipes, and staged, self-portrait performance-based photographs. The paper is divided into six main sections, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. In each section of this paper I will provide a personal narrative or contextual overview of my work, followed by a discussion of specific images relevant to the conceptual imagery displayed in the *Artificial Sweetener* gallery exhibition.

Don't Cry Over Spilled Milk

I was born and raised on the Southside of Chicago. My father is a second generation Polish-Catholic American and my mother, a second generation Irish-Catholic American. Both of my parents are the first of each of their families to marry outside of their culturally segregated, Irish-American and Polish-American communities. Both of these tight-knit, insular cultural communities continue to thrive in the city and suburbs of Chicago to this day. For eighteen years of my life I attended Catholic schools, went to Mass on Sundays, and when other Chicagoans would ask where I was from, my answer was based on what Parish I had grown up in. My family has accumulated seventy years of history based solely in our Southside neighborhood of Beverly. My father left for a life in Florida in 1995, when I was four years old. As a result, my siblings and I were raised primarily by my mother and her family, in a neighborhood that prided itself entirely on its Irish roots. Neither of my parents obtained a college degree. Consequently, education became one of the most important values for their children, along with striving for financial stability (even more so). In his examinations of the Irish-American way of life, historian Lawrence McCaffrey discusses the mentality of many of these tight-knit Irish communities. He states, "The whole emphasis of Catholic education has been for *respectability*, not creativity. You were expected to read books, not write them. Listen to music, don't compose it. Study art history, but be a lawyer, be a doctor. Bright young men- and women- want to be lawyers, not poets" (Dezell, 82).

Despite how the rest of the world may view the Southside of Chicago—as poor and crime infested— I never saw it that way growing up. I never felt safer or more protected than I did as a child living there. To a considerable extent, the dynamic of this section of the city is a state of mind: the Southside is the part of the city that houses people who consider themselves to be Southsiders. 'Knowing your place' and having a sense of humor about life were things that every kid on the Southside was taught to never forget. We were sheltered, secure, and clannish within a tight knit and long-established cultural bubble. We were encouraged to succeed, but only at certain things, for better or worse. As I grew up, I became suffocated by that sense of security; you should try to achieve something, but if you fail, *just*

remember where you came from. Have dreams, but when those dreams *surely* fall through (and you can bet they will), make sure you have a union job lined up in the city. Apply for nursing school. Become a kindergarten teacher. This clan lifestyle eventually became stifling in many ways. Indications of social detachment from within this established circle begin to emerge the moment one considers leaving this community. It is, what ultimately led me to seek out graduate school in Hawai'i. My neighborhood and familial lifestyle has now informed the locus of my creative output. It is eventually what led me to the visual exploration of my mother's kitchen, hand-written recipes, and boxes of family photographs stored in her home. I became inclined to make work about the claustrophobic parameters subconsciously being set for me.

In her book, *Irish America Coming into Clover*, Maureen Dezell re-examines the Irish American identity through interviews, observations and anecdotal experiences from Irish Americans, historians, and writers from all over the United States. The contributors discuss and dissect the stereotypes (lazy, violent alcoholics, for example) that have disparaged this culture, while also tracing the changing makeup of the Irish population. Dezell interviews journalist Pete Hamill, who describes what he calls the 'green ceiling' complex stating, "to have an ambition beyond the cops and the firemen was to be guilty of the sin of pride. It meant you didn't accept your lot in life. You didn't pay enough attention when you were asked over and over, 'Who the hell do you think you are?'" (Dezell, 81). This demand was uttered and repeated in classrooms, homes, and parishes for generations, and echoes the traditions of my own experience growing up on the Southside of Chicago, and has since become a primary driving force in my work.

Overextended humility is a premise that often led to these overarching values in my Irish-Catholic upbringing mentioned above. *11006 South Fairfield Ave*. (figure 2) aims to be a visceral portrait that delves into my ancestral roots and childhood experiences. In the photograph, there are two scoops of melting ice cream impeding on the address sign on the house. This image was taken on a hot and sunny summer day in Chicago, on the front porch of my childhood home.

My recent familial history is important to this body of images because the work involves the nuclear family and its direct affect on my psyche and personal experiences. I experienced infancy, childhood, teenage years, and young adulthood in this house; living in the same shared bedroom with my older sister, for nearly my entire life. This type of psychologically isolated yet communal lifestyle was the same for my siblings and the rest of my extended family, for the past seventy years in this area of Chicago. *Two Percent* (figure 13) touches on this self-deprecating tendency of humility. Remember who you are. Clean up your *own* mess. Being normal and blending in is a privilege. If you can keep to yourself and make sure nobody outside the home knows your business then you are doing something right. *Silence is a skill.* These are the daily mantras echoed throughout not only my family but also the entire neighborhood I grew up in. There is an overarching and encircling presence of containment in *Two Percent* (figure 13). The found family photographs and my familial history were motivation to make this photograph. Creating this image was an investigation into my attachment to my childhood home, and responds to the tensions that are present between my psyche and that specific place. In this image, the milk has already been spilled, there is no use crying over it— until it starts to drip off the table onto the floor, until it begins to create a much larger, much more noticeable *mess*. This image depicts the popular idiom: "don't cry over spilled milk." It illustrates a glass of milk that has spilled onto a kitchen table. *Two Percent* is a way to talk about the 'mess' of my psychological space in relation to the physical, intimate space of the home I have known my whole life. The kitchen is seemingly abandoned— the door is open and the spilled milk has already started spreading from inside the glass, moving towards the edges of the table. There are napkins nearby, but nobody is present to clean up the mess. This is how my current artwork functions— I want to witness the mess and watch it grow instead of immediately cleaning it up.

Methods and Motivations: Stand Up and Tell Us Your Age, Your Age

As I sifted through my family's photographs this past December, I could not help but notice the excessive amount of images that were centered on the occasion of a birthday. There are hundreds of photos documenting each person in my family on their 'special day.' I can remember the first time my father was not in town for one of our birthdays. It was 1996, and my older sister Lauren was turning ten. She was absolutely devastated that her father wasn't there for this monumental day in her life. We all were. But despite this sadness, it was still her birthday. So as usual, my mom propped the cake in front of her on the dining room table, grabbed the camera, and told her to smile. I found the photo depicting this moment in my hunt through the boxes of photographs at my mother's house. The instant I saw the image, I impulsively thought about throwing it into the garbage in an effort to make it easier for me to forget, or to no longer be reminded of it. I found several more family photographs of comparable instances, and found that I had a similar reaction towards them as well (figure 12). However, I did not throw the pictures away. Instead, this undeniable, remarkably aching memory became the backbone of my current MFA thesis work. These pictures are so hard for me to look at, perhaps, because they defy the conventions of the family album and of a traditional familial narrative. They are being used, altered, and interpreted in a way that was never intended at the moment the photograph was made. Yet, looking at the photograph of Lauren on her 10th birthday, and hundreds of others pushed me to finally confront the contradictions in the narrative I have subconsciously created about that time. These photographs force me to look at suppressed feelings that I have gradually grown to acknowledge, through awareness and self-reflection.

In my re-photographed images, things are not as they once appeared. A recipe re-photographed is no longer used for cooking. In my work, I attempt to re-contextualize, and re-connect the photograph to the reality or truth of my own repressed memory and emotion. What is photographed on the surface cannot reveal the truth of the pain that lies underneath. However, with my self-portraits I attempt to subvert this notion by speaking truthfully, as an adult, reflecting on the discomfort and absurdity of a lifetime's worth of familial secrecy, through a more obvious, focused mess making. In my self-portrait performances, I make

messes that will forever be frozen in time, out there for all to see (figure 9). The self-portrait performances were made in response to viewing my found family photographs and recipes. My reaction to seeing these snapshots can be seen in the ways I self mutilate, and the ways I continually reenact a comical yet grotesque routine that I have established over the last three years. By using the materials in a physical way and by altering the original purpose of the foods, I can attempt to use the foods as a way to address the parts of my psychology I have long tried to avoid. By *feeling* the substances on my skin, experiencing the way it behaves when it comes into contact with my body and recording it with my camera, I am forcing myself to be conscious and react in *some* way (whether it be bodily or emotional). These two 'bodies' of images must work together to create one unified series.

I have looked through these boxes of family photographs only a few times in my life, but during my rummage through them in this particular instance, my short feeling of nostalgia quickly turned into a feeling of dread and I no longer wanted to look through the boxes— nervous of what I might find that would spark a memory of times didn't want to remember. I started to recognize several of these photographs symbolized more than just a birthday celebration. Many of the images in which my mother served as photographer, the family photographs were a way to both disguise the abuse she had withstood, and to document the absence of our father, her husband, at significant events in his children's lives.

In my family, as well as most American families, birthday parties are an opportunity for photographic record. The birthday party photograph elicits the desire for the preservation of youth, time, and family. A birthday as represented in a family snapshot suggests a time of presumed familial bond and an overarching image of parental presence, personal significance, and heightened self-worth. It is the one-day of the year that loved ones can come together and celebrate a family member's life, to recognize both the people who gave them life, and the importance of their presence in each other's lives.

Every person had to abide by the rules of our family birthday tradition. As the candles on your birthday cake are lit you were to prepare for a picture where you hold your cake up, or stand next to your cake, smile, and make sure the words "happy birthday" were visible to the photographer. Of course the cake got a separate photo of its own, so everyone had

documentation of the beautiful sugary sweet treat you were lucky enough to get in honor of turning another year older (Figure 11). I have found dozens of these images in not only my mother's albums, but in her sisters' and her mother's photo albums as well, such as *Untitled (Happy Birthday).* If photography was more accessible at the time, I can only assume my mother's grandmother would have had similar looking albums to show each family member turning a year older, with the familiar frosting 'Happy Birthday' writing on the cake or the lit candles glowing in the image.

In the *Artificial Sweetener* exhibition, I have scattered three cakes on small tables throughout the gallery space (figure 18). The cakes are 'fake,' made out of Styrofoam and 'frosted' with the words "Happy Birthday," in caulk and acrylic paint, referencing the hundreds of cake photographs in my mother's collection. The fake-cakes replicate a category of domestic work from my familial history that, presently, is beyond my grasp and complete understanding. These cakes I have made can never be eaten, and, subsequently, they will never rot or deteriorate as a real cake would. The fake-cakes appear to be perfect and completely unattainable. They are presented in a cold, unwelcoming manner, marked with no specificity to a person, age, or time. These fake-cakes are another way for me to investigate the memories I have associated with the Birthday as a child. The prop is no longer being used for eating or celebrating. From a standard viewing distance, the cakes appear to be homemade and look quite desirable. Upon closer inspection of these treats, however, the viewer discovers the falsity of these desserts and may realize that they are merely sculptures, artificially replicated versions of the real. This is a parallel to the images that I am referencing in my work. In the original found family photographs, there is an appearance of normalcy upon first glance. But upon closer inspection, and through the manipulations I make, there is an uncovering of the deceptiveness that lies on the surface. When entering the exhibition space, the viewer will see the fake-cakes in relation to the images on the wall, including *Untitled (Happy Birthday)* (figure 11), which presents a nearly identical cake to the fake-cake in the gallery.

After making a few of these fake-cakes, I started to realize I was attempting to recreate my mother's domestic routines that she performed when I was young. As a child, I used to

watch her intently while she made cakes for her children's birthday celebrations. I would beg to be a part of the ritual, asking her if I could apply the frosting to the freshly baked bread, or at least throw the sprinkles on top. I continued to watch her perform these actions over and over, memorizing her directions, her process, the way she applied the frosting to the cake and the way she wrote the letters of our names with the frosting. Although the cakes in the gallery are 'fake,' they mimic the symbol of the Birthday and what it meant in my family, and the absurdity of the rituals that we have performed over and over again. The gallery cakes are no more or less 'fake' than the edible cakes that were presented at my childhood birthday parties. While making these fake-cakes I started to see myself repeat the performances my mother so often acted out during my childhood. I heard myself reciting her baking rules in my head as I applied the caulk 'frosting' to the Styrofoam, as I chose the colors that were to be applied to the top, and caught myself cringing if I made a mistake in my cursive writing. The fake-cakes are both symbolically nostalgic and melancholic. They are an impersonation of the artificiality of my all-American family represented in my family photographs.

Process: The Sin of Gluttony

This series stems from a place of absence, denial, and silence. Sociologists, therapists and historians have noted that the Irish are unusual among American ethnicities in their failure to pass on family histories to their children, in part because so few of them saw any reason to talk about them or write them down. “Fear of the unpardonable sin of pride was still strong enough to preclude seeing one’s small and insignificant self as an important element in the great scheme of things” writes historian Thomas O’Connor, “As a result, most Irish people had an acute, often ironic, and usually comical sense of the present but seldom a personal sense of the past” (Dezell, 73).

I use irony as a significant component of the *Artificial Sweetener* series. In my work, humor has been used as a way to both mask tension and reveal an incongruity. Merriam Webster applies two definitions that are relevant to the irony that is present throughout the entire *Artificial Sweetener* exhibition. One definition is as follows: “a situation that is strange or funny because things happen in a way that seems to be the opposite of what you expected” (Webster, n.p). Another defines irony as, “A literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character’s words or actions are clear to the audience although unknown to the character” (Webster, n.p). These terms relate to the voice I am using in this series. In the found and manipulated family imagery (figure 4), acting as both agent and audience I am manipulating the interpretation of the actions of the characters in the images. The ‘full significance’ of their actions is now clear to me as an adult, but was indeed unclear to the characters in the snapshots. I am returning to a photographic memory of my childhood as an adult and self-made person, now experiencing life outside the personal and larger historical family parameters. In the exhibition, I allow myself to re-contextualize and direct my interpretation of these past childhood scenes as an informed adult. Therefore, in my viewing and re-photographing the images, the dynamics of power have shifted in some ways— as both viewer and agent, I am in a position of authority (over the image as object). As an adult, in my work, I am essentially acting on the impulse to perform a transgressive act on both myself in the performative portraits, and on the physical photographic snapshot object.

In the found family photographic imagery, I am manipulating the original photograph (figure 10). Although technology would allow me to easily re-photograph the image before destroying it as to further preserve the original photograph, I deliberately choose to use the original print. This fragile object becomes an integral part in the process of my transgression. I use the sticky food material to manipulate the original image, re-photograph, and later, remove the excess food from the image. Often after I go through this process, the original family photograph is destroyed or severely damaged. I find this part of my practice the most violating. It forces me to have a direct response to the 'evidence' or memory associated with the image. It calls for open confrontation to the imagery, and further to my memory associated with it.

In the Catholic Church, the seven deadly sins: hubris, greed, lust, envy, anger, sloth, and gluttony, are thought to be abusive or excessive versions of one's natural passions. Committing any of the seven deadly sins may result in extreme guilt and penance for the committer. Gluttony, or the overindulgence of food and drink to the point of extravagance and waste, is the sin most predominantly visible in my series of images. In response to these Catholic traditions and ideals, the self-portraits in *Artificial Sweetener* are printed at a large, almost excessive scale. The sin of gluttony "drips" from many of these images (figure 5), both literally and metaphorically. The sizes of the self-portraits in the exhibition are printed larger than life, while the found family photographs are printed roughly four times larger than their original size. The found family photographs inform the performative self-portraits. The portraits are at a scale that allows the viewer to explore all the details of the image, from the textures of the food materials to the singular hairs that are visible on the figure's head. The images are printed at this size to reiterate my exploration of psychological stickiness. When displayed at this size, the images (figure 3) intimidate me as a viewer. The scale of the images is used to provoke a discomfort in the viewer when walking through the installation space. For both the self-portraits and the found family photographs, scale is used to echo the inescapable nature of the psychology that these images expose. The viewer must confront the images in some way; there is not an option of overlooking them.

There is a tension between the deep cultural traditions I was raised with and the instantaneous and artificial nature of the confectionary foods in my work. Moreover, the act of making these messes on my self is highly transgressive notion. As a child I would have been punished for these acts, but as an adult I am able to subvert the power relationship between parent and child, and through this transgression, re-claim ownership of my childhood experiences. By photographing myself in relation to, and in collaboration with these sticky foods, I am deconstructing my self and my past, visually. I do this as a way to understand and respond to all that the family snapshot photographs do not show. The irony of the photograph being the sole outlet for interpretation as means to understand these transgressions and my complex relationships is of crucial importance to the series. This aesthetic choice insinuates the continuous, repetitive cycle of contradictions in the narratives that have occurred in my familial history.

Similar to the birthday party traditions I have found myself exploring through the found family photographs, the food material used in my self-portrait photographs is deployed as an outrageous mask, as if it is reiterating the cheerful birthday party used to disguise the internal happenings of family life. Photographing the result of covering my face and head almost entirely with these foods is an act that is both exaggerated and highly calculated. The sweetness overload is humorous at first glance- but over time, it becomes sarcastic, or even sinister in its delivery, almost as an act of self-mutilation that expresses the inescapable feeling of being stuck in a situation, an emotion, a relationship, or a lifestyle. This overwhelming 'stickiness' becomes present through the excessive use of 'food stuff' on my physical body. I create these moments of discomfort, sometimes even violence, for the sole reason of recording them for the camera, in order to experience a moment that reiterates and acts as evidence of the complicated, underlying familial tensions made visible through the photographs I create.

One Last Feast

When I created the photographs entitled *Fat Tuesday* and *Trespassing* (figure 14 and figure 15) in October of 2016, it was certainly not the first of my photo-performances. I had gone to a bakery in Honolulu, and found what I had originally thought to be a paczki. A paczki is a traditional Polish dish, consisting of deep fried pieces of dough, shaped into spheres and filled with jam, marmalade, custards, or similar fruit based jelly, comparable to a donut. During the preparation for the Catholic season of Lent, a season of "repentance, prayer, and fasting" Catholics traditionally abstain from meat and animal-based products in preparation for Easter Sunday. Fat Tuesday is the day in which Catholics would eat the remainder of those items in their home before Ash Wednesday, one "last feast" before the start of the holy season (Catholic Online, n.p). Due to the large population of Polish immigrants, Fat Tuesday in Chicago is better known as "Paczki day." Every year, until her death, my paternal grandmother would hand make several paczkis for her children and grandchildren and deliver them to each family. After she died and, until my uprooting to Hawai'i, my siblings and I would choose someone to go to Wolf's Bakery down the street where we would stand in line (often for nearly an hour), and order a box full of paczkis. To my surprise, in Honolulu, I found a window full of donuts that resembled these delicious Polish treats, and decided to use them for my photo shoot that afternoon.

I had purchased several of these Fat Tuesday desserts, variations of lemon, raspberry, and strawberry filling. I started by manipulating the donut, squeezing it and examining the gooey insides, breaking it apart with my hands and then, with the slight hesitation I always start with, I took the treat and smashed it against my face. After about forty minutes or so of my repetitive, unrelenting photographic performance in the studio, I stopped and reviewed the images on my camera (still with a face-full of jelly), decided I had gotten enough images, and started the clean up process of washing off the sticky goo from my body. As I stood at the sink I went through the familiar routine of continually throwing water at my face and then scrubbing the material off. After about five minutes of this process I noticed that my face was stinging and my eyes were slightly burning. I sat back down and decided to document more of my current physical state of being (figure 15). As I turned to the mirror, I saw through my jam-

clouded eyes a rash had formed on my face, and faint signs of hives on my neck and chest appearing from what I assumed to be a mild allergic reaction to the jelly. I have had minor reactions to certain sticky materials before, so I continued to clean myself up as usual, and my focus shifted back to making sure I cleaned up both the studio and enough of myself so that I could leave the room and return to a public space without raising question about my appearance.

I realized several hours later the irony of the situation that had presented itself earlier that day. Not only did these paczki-like pastries initially spark my attention at the bakery that morning, but later they also physically caused a reaction with my body upon contact. These treats have been one of only a very few indicators of my Polish heritage in my life of the last two decades that has not been stifled by an Irish upbringing. My body physically rejected what I had once considered a key connection to my Polish familial ties. Through the delayed reaction to this realization I grew more aware of the fact that not only did I have a reaction to this jelly substance, but I also ignored it, and denied a psychological response to my physical changes. I made sure that when I left the set, there was no remaining evidence left for the world outside the isolated studio space to connect me with these unusual set of internal and external circumstances. I realized from this experience, that just as my family maintains a façade to the outside world, I also erect a façade, once I leave the safety of the studio set where I am no longer alone. When I am finished photographing, to an outside audience, I leave the scene with a change of clothes and a seemingly 'cleaned up' body. Although this is not the case internally or upon closer inspection- I am usually sticky and uncomfortable for the rest of the day. I feel exposed in a strangely vulnerable way, damp, and raw; yet, these internal struggles are rarely, if ever, evident to anyone other than myself.

Within the *Artificial Sweetener* installation I have positioned two images next to one another so that, through the use of color, an implied presence of the Irish flag appears within the space (figure 19). The image on the left uses a green backdrop, while the one on the right uses a bright orange backdrop. Together, and through the inclusion of the negative space of the gallery wall, they refer to the national flag of Ireland. *Fat Tuesday* and *Trespassing* were photographed using the color red, one of the national colors of Poland. Juxtaposing these

images is a subtle way of making my cultural heritage present through the use of color. I wanted this pair to be present and centered in the gallery space to demonstrate the dominating presence my Irish heritage has over my Polish heritage, not only in my work but also in my upbringing.

In creating *Fat Tuesday* and *Trespassing*, this was the single portrait session in which my father's Polish heritage began as the focal point to the conceptual imagery. This is one of the only images in which, through the photographs, I have confronted the viewer with a gaze of defiance and undeniable presence (figure 15). This image made me think about the absence of my face in other images in which I have obstructed the gaze (figure 14) by continually masking myself with pastries and candies and sugars to block a direct emotional connection between the viewer and the figure. I am often psychologically absent from the space I am working in during my performative studio sessions, a coping mechanism I have taken on to endure the discomfort of the task at hand. *Fat Tuesday* and *Trespassing* were the first images in which looking at the photographs provoked a haunting sense of my father's implicated presence as viewer. My absence within the emotional space in this work (blank stares, closed eyes) became about his presence. It was not until the installation of this exhibition when I realized the strength of the specified (implicated) audience presence was my father. I imagined him looking at the images with his own analysis, which immediately disconnected me from the work. Through the space there are central areas of action, movement, and change throughout the exhibition. There are areas of areas of suppression, and areas of redemption within the order and groupings of the images. However, the work centers on a structure that starts and ends the circular viewing order with a self-portrait that is giving a very direct, forceful gaze, as if to show my attempted departure from the confinements of the mind space that has motivated the making of this work.

This particular set of images has challenged me in the ways in which I am forced to confront the authority of certain people from my past, and how their presence affects the spaces of thought in which I occupy. Whether or not I am capable of admitting it to myself, ironically, my work can be seen to suggest that there is an odd parallel between my absent father and myself that becomes evident in the work I have produced. Because of this, after

installing the exhibition and viewing the work in its specific space, a distance was formed between the work and myself. I no longer saw the work to be of my own personal catharsis, but instead a severed, unforeseen detachment emerged towards the images and their meaning. The pressures of containment within certain systems I have been a part of, the so-called 'ingredients' that make up a successful family unit or a successful life, were not enough to preserve both of us as individuals in that arena. My father left his family, his responsibilities and his life, as an adult, capable of making informed, authoritative decisions. His transgression was the abandonment. I left that same arena in a premeditated, although less abrupt and somewhat naïve way. The transgressions visible in my work are in my attempts to expose the repercussions of these parallel circumstances. Through installing this body of images in the gallery I became more aware of the different perspectives the series provokes from each character that occurs in the imagery. In many ways, a central question that arises from my images asks the viewer to investigate what it means to leave one's home and family, and further— is there an acceptable way to do so?

There's Always Room for Jell-O

While looking through my mother's photo boxes in my childhood home this past winter, I decided to explore her collection of recipes as well. Through this exploration I discovered several recipes in which there were more than one and up to ten different variations of the same dish. I was both intrigued and perplexed by the recipes in my mother's collection. Among the collection I found six separate recipes for variations of Jell-O. These recipes often had extremely detailed notes and instructions written on them (figure 6), in an attempt to make a very simple meal into a prestigious dish for family gatherings. A selection of these recipes have been reproduced and included in the *Artificial Sweetener* exhibition. I have re-photographed them and enlarged their scale, but have not altered their appearance from when I found them. There is an appearance of authenticity in the images that counteracts the reality of the instant gratification inherent in the preparation of Jell-O. These heroic recipe prints are an attempt to reveal that in my mother's goal to successfully fulfill the roles of mother, father, provider and homemaker on her own (an absurdly impossible task), she did not have time to be everything. In my work, the handwritten recipes portray my mother's personality in ways that most photographs of her could not: her near-perfect academic cursive, straight, hard lines, and incredibly detailed instructions showing her confidence in the production of these instant just-add-water Jell-O formulas. Unlike in other realms of her life, the making of this food was something she could easily control— follow the directions and everything will turn out fine. *Keep to the directions on the recipe*.

When I was sixteen years old, it was my family's turn to host Thanksgiving dinner in our home for my mother's family, which included her mother, siblings, and their families. My mom started preparing for this meal at 4:00 A.M. the morning of Thanksgiving Day. She spent hours preparing every dish, but she spent a particularly long time preparing the mashed potatoes. She washed, skinned, and cut dozens of potatoes because she was not familiar with making this dish, as usually the task fell to someone else in the family. When she finally finished preparing all of the ingredients, she put them together in a giant pot and gave my sister Lauren the task of keeping watch on them, to follow the directions on the recipe and to make sure they turned out perfectly. Somewhere along the way, however, the potatoes fell

apart. The mixture became gluey and soggy, and the concoction resembled more of a chunky soup-like dish than any resemblance to potatoes. Instead of admitting the defeat, my mother, in a fit of stress and panic, tried to think of a solution before our guests began to arrive, which would be in less than thirty minutes. She immediately grabbed a box of *Hungry Jack* instant mashed potatoes that we always had stored on the kitchen counter, and began to quickly stir these dehydrated flakes into a bowl of simulated, 'made-from-scratch' mashed potatoes. When the guests arrived for dinner, people raved about the mashed potatoes. They commended my mother on a job well done, and she never revealed to them that her potatoes were not technically the "homemade" ones they were expecting.

After my discovery of my mother's recipes, I decided to explore my grandmother's recipes and her family photographs as well. *Christmas, 1983* (figure 1) was found in one of my grandmother's photo albums, stored away in her closet in her home, where my mother grew up. There is a tone of sarcasm and slight mockery, which is an extremely common trait in my family, used as a way to forge relationships with one another. This type of demeanor displayed in my grandmother's writing is, perhaps, the reason my mother never revealed her misstep with the Thanksgiving potato fiasco years ago: the fear of ridicule from her own flesh and blood. *Christmas, 1983* depicts a candid moment of my grandmother opening a present from her daughter (my mother) on Christmas Day in 1983. The writing below the photograph on the page reads, "Ter, could you make me an afghan? I need it by 1990." The image and text interact in multiple ways. One informs the other, as the text adds what the photograph omits, and vice versa. *Christmas, 1983* gives context to the relationships that have been constructed between mother and daughter— the simultaneously familiar, humorous, yet tense relationship that has grown from years of felt experiences, pressures, and history, communicated between one generation and the next.

As I examined my mother's recipes, I saw how they became a more accurate portrait of the woman I know than of the person she often pretends to be in photographs. In my research of our family photographs, I found that the images of my mother (figure 7) break down in ways her recipes do not. Her personal history exists in her words and thoughts on these scrap papers filled with lists of ingredients. I came to realize that, in the scarce amount

of photographs in which she appears, her presence seems artificial and her self-doubt heavy. She appears to become simultaneously fragile and distant, vulnerable yet incredibly self-contained. In the images, I could see her discomfort, her lack of trust in herself and in the people who surround her, masked by her blank smiles or distracted glances past the person taking the photograph. In the performative images of myself (figure 9), the physical material I am using becomes a disguise— that is however, continually decomposing, incessantly in movement and dripping off my face, as if it is begging to be pulled off. In many (not all) of the photographs of her, my mother's mask of normalcy never comes off. I find her to be most confident in the concoctions she bakes in the kitchen. Where I see her truest self revealed is in her distinct, perfect handwriting with its perfectly formed cursive lines, and finally in the way she takes pride in her neatness and her capabilities as the intelligent and adequate woman that she is. I somehow see the paradox of her life in these notes as well, a simultaneous strength in 'making the best' of what she was given, coupled with her longing for the better education she was never allowed to pursue; her longing for a better, more forgiving and generous life than what she was given.

By using artificial and instant ingredients in my photographic performance work, I am both critiquing and reiterating the tactics that my mother and her forbearers assimilated in their own domestic relationships. I am using these convenience foods to reflect on and respond to moments of absurdity (such as the mashed potato forgery), that filter through the confines of my mind when viewing a childhood photo or reliving a memory. The inauthentic nature of the potatoes did not stop my family from eating them. And the falsity of the constructed, recorded moments depicted in my family photographs did not stop the very real emotional difficulties and experiences from occurring. Impeding on a past moment is my way of changing the authenticity and authority of the previously recorded moment in time. I use sticky materials as a way to puncture through the photographic image— not to deny the existence of the characters or to reshape my childhood relationships, but to alter the existing delusion of an idealized, "picture-perfect" past, and to excavate evidence of the more authentic moments that must exist under the surface level of these snapshot photographs.

Context: Bruised, Battered and Bottled Up

For many decades family photography has often been seen simply as snapshots of domestic scenes, as images that reflect and produce normative notions of family. But family photographs are more complex than we think— they frequently float between public and private spheres, linking personal memories with national histories. Just as important, they do not just illustrate families, but also shape the very idea of family as a social structure. Family photographs have the ability to form the identity of a person through representation and the act of looking. In my work, re-photographing the snapshot becomes more truthful and psychologically valid. In the case of both my self-portraiture as well as the manipulated and re-photographed snapshots, I am attempting to pierce through layers of photographic artifice, in an effort to arrive at an image that is an authentic response to an assessment of the reality of my childhood experiences. For example, in *Florida 07/97* (figure 16) I have used the original composition of the found family photograph to further increase the truthfulness of my re-photographed manipulation. The photograph is smeared with a red sticky substance—a 'Gusher,' which is a candy fruit snack made of a chewy gelatinous sugar covering, filled with a thick, sweet liquid inside. The Gushers have been squished and smeared on the found family photograph. The figures in the image are seemingly aware of this mutation, and responding to the phallic-shaped sugary impediment that is beginning to consume them.

This awareness from the characters in these photographs is a drastic shift in the story, because Irish families, including my own, often go to great lengths to avoid emotional scenes. Sigmund Freud is said to have once remarked that the Irish subculture "is one race of people for whom psychoanalysis is of no use whatsoever" (Dezell, 131). In the Catholic ritual of Reconciliation, Catholics reveal not their strengths but instead the sins of their souls, to ask for forgiveness after acknowledging guilt or weakness. Therefore, self-disclosure outside the confessional is an admission of vulnerability, which is an unacceptable tactic, particularly for Irish families who prefer to stifle emotions and instead choose silence as a way to respond to conflict or strife. "Punitive silence is a hallmark of the 'sainted Irish mother,' who may 'offer up' anything that upsets her—a drinking problem, a divorce, a gay child—in a muted martyrdom of silent, sometimes seething, suffering. Deflecting difficult subjects is a way of

pretending they do not exist" (Dezell, 133). Thus, for obvious reasons, these tactics often lead to destructive behavior, an inability to show emotion, and the potential to forever sever familial relationships. The intensity of silent suffering, of emotional neglect, is often equally as destructive and just as traumatizing as a punch to the face. The deep admiration for stoicism, coping with psychological pain and tragedy without 'breaking down' or weakening by showing pain or grief is considered admirable in contemporary culture, particularly Irish-American. Life is hard, and misfortune is to be expected. Coping with difficult emotions may be solved in three ways: deny, deny, *deny*.

Through *Artificial Sweetener,* I am attempting to talk about the power of silent suffering, the significance of emotional neglect and the healing power of truth. In the past, I have been conditioned to connect with others by sharing sticky treats and politely keeping my mouth closed. These images are a way of visually communicating both the past and the present. Through the photographs I am communicating my unspoken, sticky, distress. Yet the images also function to reverse the power relationship— to take back power and expose the silences by critiquing and refusing to participate in it. In these images, I am analyzing the inherent conditioning of my immediate past, in an overt rebellion and triumph over my personal history.

Another artist whose accomplishes similar goals with her work is the photographer Nan Goldin. Although her more photojournalistic aesthetic and subject matter differs greatly from my own, I feel it is important to make a comparison between her series *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* and mine. Goldin has a deeply personal narrative within her work; she lived with her subjects, and subsequently chose them as her family, or her 'tribe.' Her work draws attention to the tension between pain, love, and desire. Part of the beauty and tragedy in her work is her awareness of how humans replicate the hopes and disappointments or absent love we knew at home with those known as our parents (Als, n.p). *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* is her best-known work and a benchmark for photographers who believe in the narrative of the self and it's relation to the private and public display of living. Her photograph entitled *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (figure 8) is perhaps the most infamous photograph within the series. Nan Goldin ran away from home when she was fifteen. In doing

so, she documented everything she experienced—sex, drugs, violence, and more. Goldin was making the work from within the world she became a part of, yet she had to detach far enough from the experience as an artist to be able to fully see the work for what it was. She went through long periods of heavy addiction to drugs and alcohol, and her photographs became an open book of loss and desire. In her image, *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (figure 8), which is essentially a self portrait in a mirror, her own gaze is incredibly strong and telling; she did not have a choice in the domestic violence that was present in her relationship—she *did* however, make the choice to stay, and to photograph it.

There is a tension of agency within her series that is relevant to my work in the *Artificial Sweetener* series. Where Goldin owned her vulnerability by photographing herself face first after being assaulted, I use photographs in which the memory associated with the image or the moment becomes an object. It is manipulated and warped to portray the vulnerability I feel when looking and responding to an image of my past or a recognition of my psychological attachment to it. In my self-portraits, the vulnerability I confront is deflected by sarcasm and sticky material. The material and the substances interacting with my body becomes more of the subject than me as myself. But my self-portraits reveal even as they conceal. Though the figure's face may be disguised with sticky foods (figure 14), it is through the use of these materials that the uncomfortable difficulty of handling emotional distress is recognized.

Goldin chose to portray her subjects in a way that documented her understanding as both photographer and participant. She documents, experiences, and reacts from inside of the system she was a part of. Her work is a visual diary of experience. She positioned herself to be both character and audience—not to leave the arena, but to stay, and to photograph her own journey. I chose to represent my childhood experiences through sticky materials (figure 3), and through the act of manipulating photographic objects (figure 16), in blatant rebellion towards the systems I was conditioned to during my childhood. As the biggest transgression I could have made in my position, I chose to leave the arena of which I am making this work about. Both Goldin and I are rebelling against an established lifestyle, and drawing attention to a certain genre of pain. Like Goldin, I have also negotiated the role of the

audience to participate in this series, to perform as an uncomfortable role of 'witness.' The struggle for a need to understand connections and intimacies between families is our common thread. The stories that these images tell are complex, contradictory intrusions on familial relationships. Goldin's work is a record of a personal, publicly violent history— a record of her life and the lives of those around her, of life 'as it was happening' (Als, n.p). *Artificial Sweetener* is a revealing of silent suffering in a system of denial. My images extend into the uncomfortable space of dissidence, and the refusal to remain a submissive player in the predetermined boundaries that were put in place in my life.

Conclusion: Made It To "Paradise"

In the summer of 2014, when I stepped off the airplane at Honolulu International Airport into the hot mid-day August sun to start my graduate school career, I felt a familiar wave of a memory rush over me as I tried to find my bearings and navigate through the airport, completely alone and beginning the most challenging quest of my adult life. In that moment, I thought back to that trip to Florida in the summer of 1997: as the humid air touched my skin in Honolulu, I recalled the same feeling I had all those years ago, stepping out into a familiar yet simultaneously foreign heat. My skin was sticky, my head was foggy, and with every breath I took it felt as if there was a brick lying on my chest. Walking out of the airport, I received a phone call from my mom. Even though I felt a total lack of control, my instinctual defense mechanism was an immediate need to mask my anxiety from her, so I answered the phone in as cheery a tone as possible. "Hi mom. Yep, I just landed, the flight was fine, everything is fine, I'll talk to you a little later, I'm fine, thanks for calling." I hung up the phone, and as I headed to the street with tears in my eyes, I looked up and spotted a rainbow. Immediately I took a picture and posted it to Instagram. "Made it to paradise," the caption read.

I frequently think about that August day three years ago. I wondered if I was mirroring my family's behaviors of denial, deflecting the realities of my life from my mom and consistently inventing a new reality to perform then and several times afterward in a state of silent suffering. I wondered if my mother now looked at me the way she looked at my father—another part of her that was leaving her, betraying her, another person in her life she had failed to keep close. I realized that our divergent differences were now becoming evident though my deliberate attempt at a creation of meaning out of these trained defenses through my photographs. Making *Artificial Sweetener* has challenged me to explore the repercussions of unspoken realities, and to explore the devastating effects that unspoken pain can have on not only an individual but also the structures that make up a family unit. Through this work I expose these uncomfortable emotional situations, while my family is attempting as much as possible to subdue and bury their thoughts and feelings through baking and birthday celebrations and silence, and the projected appearance of an all-American family.

My family, like many others, is perpetually pretending things are not as they really are, falsifying the truth, covering it up with a joke, and avoiding reality in order to avoid our own honest emotional cognizance. My mother still hides her very real grief, her insecurities and thoughts of being insignificant or of being a bad mother or wife by using recipes to concoct an excess of sugary sweet desserts, as a way to hide her very real problems from the world, to express love for her family in a way that she could not do otherwise. In stark contrast, my father skipped town. I am not suggesting that my mother and father have an equally validated coping method for their problems. Of course, I am grateful and would much rather accept that I have an overly-present mother who bakes us cookies when she is feeling insecure with her life than a father who essentially abandoned his family. But the relationship between the extremely divergent reactions to the life situations my parents have had and the relationship to my own personal reaction is something to be recognized, as it shatters the idea of a nuclear family. Creating and re-contextualizing this body of images has offered me a new way to see, and to detach. The work has caused me to analyze, but also to become more visible, as an artist investigating and excavating emotions but also as a subject, performing and responding. It took me over twenty years and four thousand miles of separation to detach myself enough from my life on the South Side and to see my "self" in relation to the people who are an inseparable part of my identity— and further, to create artwork about it.

As my Catholic upbringing sneaks through the cracks of my mind, I have been struck with several bouts of guilt during the making of this work— fear that by 'stealing' and exploiting these photographs and re-contextualizing them to create the *Artificial Sweetener* series I was somehow disrespecting my family by publically presenting a more realistic experience than what was visible before. I now realize that our memory is never fully ours, nor are photographs ever direct representations of the past. Memory and meaning are inherently contextual— that is, just as photographs shift the way we remember and distort our understanding of reality, the mechanisms through which we cope with these new realizations also shift with time, distance, and upon deep reflection.

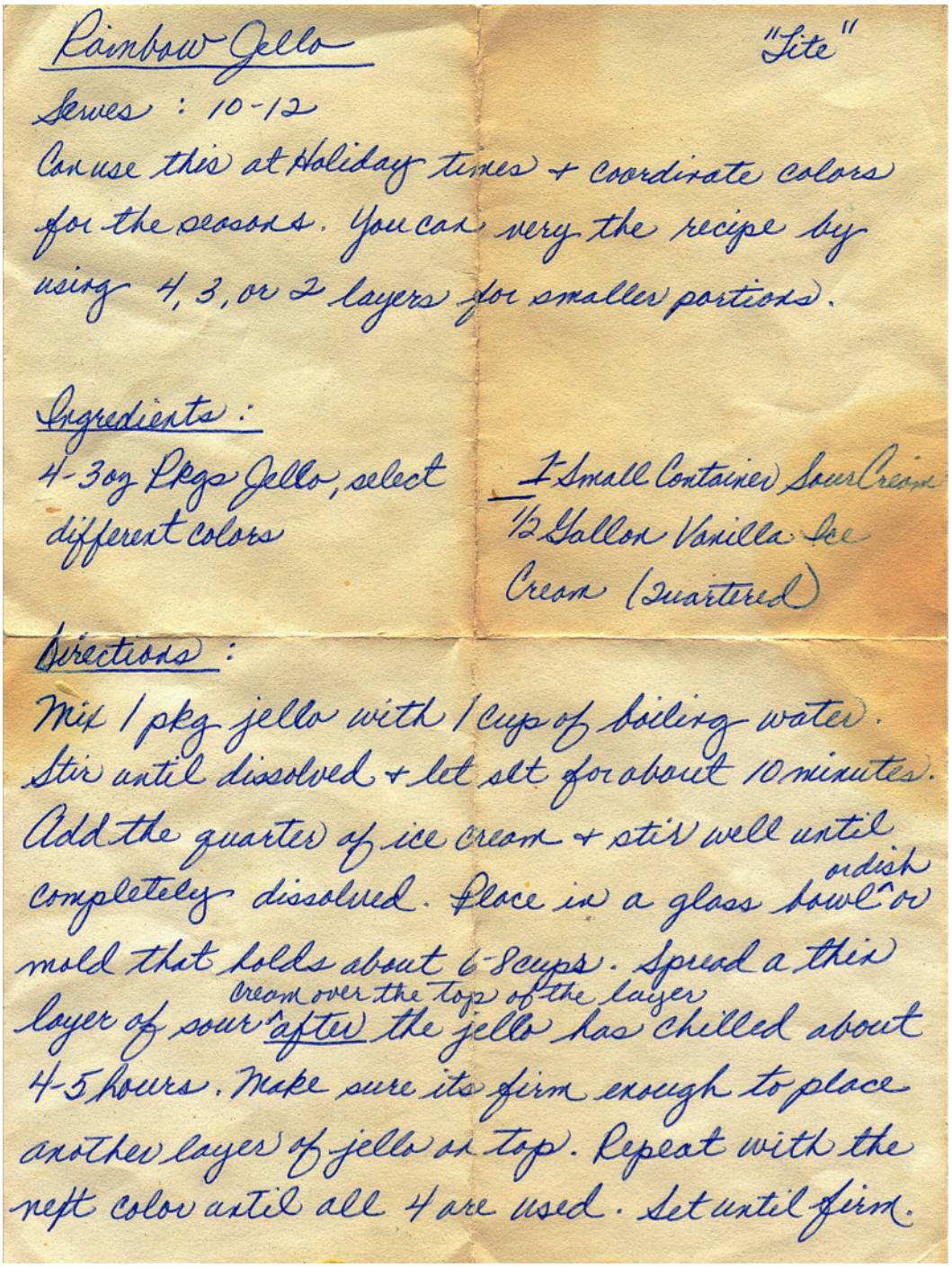
The word 'stickiness' can suggest many things: it can insinuate resistance, stubbornness, awkwardness, or difficulties. It can be an adjective to describe foods, weather,

or surfaces; it can aid in the description of sappy or heartfelt situations, and can speak to the inability to escape certain thoughts or feelings from the past. Sticky foods are often made with preservatives, which act to protect foods or other organic materials from rapid decomposition. Although we try to believe it, photographs, unlike artificial preservatives, cannot protect the people in them from decomposition, or preserve them as the people that they once were at the moment the photograph was made. Looking at, altering and re-photographing my family snapshot photographs as an adult forced me to actively engage in seeing them for the first time without a screen. I was forced to recognize the duality of the constructed nature of my photographically idealized past, coupled with the intense need to redefine these constructed memories and establish a renegotiated connection to my actual experience. Metaphorically impeding on that photographic memory, through *Artificial Sweetener* I invite the viewer into the depths of the changing structure of my familial unit. To question the photographic object as evidence and truth— and bear witness to the uncomfortable, sticky system that is family life.

Figure 3: *Soft Serve*, 2016

Figure 4*: American Club, 1994*, 2016

Figure 5: *Jet-Puffed*, 2016



Rainbow Jello "Lite"

Serves : 10-12

Can use this at Holiday times + coordinate colors for the seasons. You can vary the recipe by using 4, 3, or 2 layers for smaller portions.

Ingredients :

4-3oz Pkgs Jello, select different colors

1 Small Container Sour Cream

½ Gallon Vanilla Ice Cream (Quartered)

Directions :

Mix 1 pkg jello with 1 cup of boiling water. Stir until dissolved + let sit for about 10 minutes. Add the quarter of ice cream + stir well until completely dissolved. Place in a glass bowl or dish mold that holds about 6-8 cups. Spread a thin layer of sour cream over the top of the layer after the jello has chilled about 4-5 hours. Make sure its firm enough to place another layer of jello on top. Repeat with the next color until all 4 are used. Set until firm.

Figure 6: *Rainbow Jello*, 2016

Figure 8: Nan Goldin, *Nan One Month After Being Battered*, 1984

Figure 9: *Concord Grape*, 2016

Figure 10: *Ciurej Family Picnic*, 7/18/94, 2016

Figure 11: *Untitled (Happy Birthday),* 2016

Figure 12: *Bath Time for Kelly, 4/94*, 2016

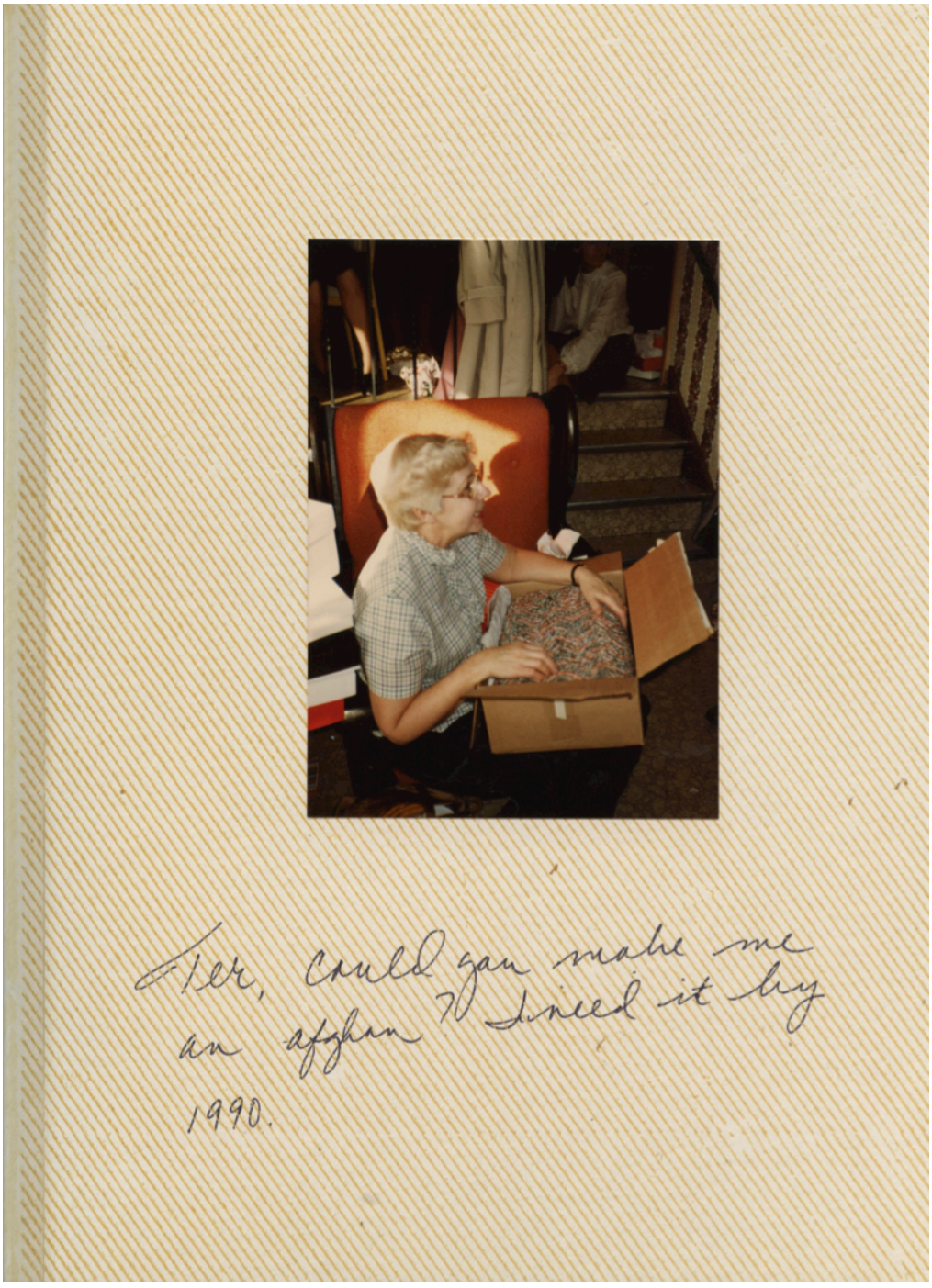


Figure 1: *Christmas, 1983*, 2016

Figure 2: *11006 South Fairfield Ave*., 2016

Figure 3: *Two Percent*, 2016

Figure 7: *Easter, 1999*, 2016

Figure 4: *Fat Tuesday*, 2016

Figure 5: *Trespassing*, 2016

Figure 16: *Florida, 07/97*, 2016

Figure 17: Installation View 1

Figure 18: *Have Your Cake and Eat It (Too),* 2017

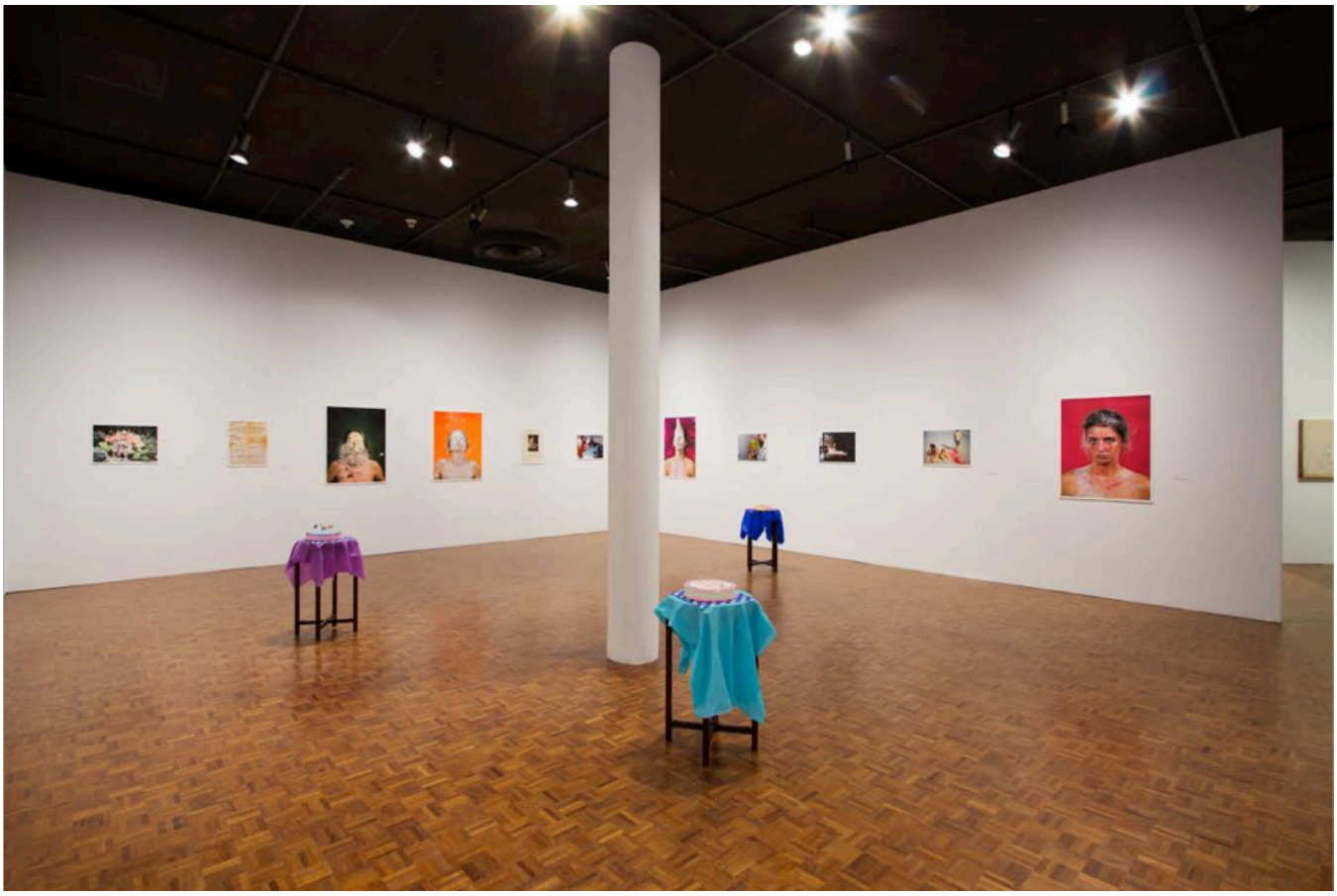


Figure 19: Installation View 2

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